

In Sri Lanka Today / Is It Rescue, Salvage or Liberation?

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This is the year 1997, and precisely in twelve months from now Sri Lanka would be celebrating fifty years of Independence. It would still be within the old and tattered twentieth century. In 1948, on the 4th of February, when some of us were just one third of our present age, we heard the thundering reverberations of our freedom achievement. On behalf of the Imperial rulers, HRH the Duke of Gloucester spoke and equally formidable local chieftains from here responded. In an improvised temporary Audience Hall, we remember many grand utterances were made on both sides, recounting the grandeur of the past and envisioning the future. Unlike in the good old days of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, these utterances never got indelibly recorded as rock inscriptions. The speakers were applauded and the words were more easily forgotten, making room for more pet themes nurtured in the heads of the then leaders of all sides. The concept of a **Democratic State of United Sri Lanka** apparently never took root at the time. The seed apparently was even never sown, let alone it sprouting. Was the concept of unity of a multi-ethnic community then taken for granted?

Even as far back as the fifth century A.D., the Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim Fa Hsien knew of the territorial integrity of this island country under the name of **Sinhala** which he copied in Chinese as **Seng - chia - lo**. He accurately rendered its meaning, as he then accurately came to know it, as the **Land of the Lion People [Shih - tse - kuo]**. One thing is clear. Statistics then, as well as they are today, appear to have corroborated the fact that the vast majority of people of the land at the time were Sinhala and that it was large enough to bestow their name on the land. Apparently ethnic chauvinism, or fundamentalist leanings, no matter on whose side they are, were not so aggressive and that fanned and enflamed,

as to enable the minorities to demand majority identities. Side by side with recognized personal identity, with one's language and religious and cultural identity duly and honestly recognized, peaceful co-existence in Sri Lanka was also a reality, recognized and respected.

In Sri Lanka of centuries ago, there appear to have been considerable numbers of Tamil speaking Buddhist monks. They grew large in numbers, perhaps due to the presence in the island of eminent Buddhist scholar monks from South India, like Ācariya Dhammapāla and the venerable Coliya Kassapa and many others. Their presence as well as the worth of their work was respectfully recognized by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka by sanctioning the recital of the Patimokkha by Bhikkhus on Uposatha days to be carried out in the Tamil language. This is an honourable concession to the Tamil speaking Buddhist monks in the island. It is also to be remembered that there were non-Sinhala Sri Lankans in the North of the island who held the religion of the Buddha in high esteem.

On the arrival in the island of the branch of the Sacred Bodhi Tree of India, dispatched by the Emperor Asoka, a Brahmin of the North by the name of Tivakka is said to have joined and assisted the king who had come from Anuradhapura, in paying homage to it. In grateful appreciation of this participation, the king is reported to have dispatched to Tivakka a new sapling of the Bodhi Tree for planting in his village [See Mahāvamsa Ch. XIX]. Note in these incidents the total spirit of mutual inter-ethnic amity and friendship which seems to have well and truly existed in this land, prior to the introduction of the germ warfare of ethnic violence. The germ has been thoughtfully and deliberately cultured over the decades, having had its origin outside the land, and equally well spread far and wide. The genesis of the war and its location is clearly visible, whether we like it or not. The result is a Hiroshima which nobody ever wanted. Let a non-partisan historical assessment give its verdict.

This being so, let us go back to our caption and picking up the word 'rescue' ask ourselves 'Who rescues whom and from whom?' It is not necessary for us to

endeavour to answer. What we wish to do is to alert our Sri Lankans [all inclusive] here and abroad, as well as others who keep their eyes glued on us as well-wishers or otherwise, about the relevance of these questions. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'rescue' as **save or set free or bring away from attack, custody, danger or harm**. This certainly does not appear to relate to what goes on in battle, in a declared war. But what of the brutal massacres of unguarded sleeping villagers, men, women and children. Study the records and decide as to who are answerable to whom. Outside the fighting line, soldiers going berserk and attacking helpless civilians, would be equally offensive. In both cases rescue squads have to be called in to operate. It is in these cases that dispassionate judgement as well as decisive action has to follow, irrespective of minority or majority interests.

That really is the role of a peace-keeping corps. In Sri Lanka today, as much as in Rwanda, a great deal of efficiently supervised rescue work has to be set in motion. Ruthless use of brutal force by man against man, in a manner that is unworthy of a civilized world, is evident everywhere. The miscreants on either side of the line have to be discovered and severely dealt with. People ought not to cloud these issues with minority or majority talk. These remarks we address to men and women with a dispassionate sense of sanity whose concern should be to put things right at their very genesis and not to hold a brief for this side or that, with an eye for political bargaining. Much less the intervention, garbed under the unsuspecting term mediation by groups whose neutrality is by no means above board. The apparent intensity of a challenge, no matter from where it comes, should not drive those in authority to search for what are passed off as acceptable solutions.

Our next word for comment in hand is 'salvage'. As far as dictionaries help us to understand the word, it means 1. save from a wreck, fire etc. 2. retrieve or preserve [something favourable] in adverse circumstances. In Sri Lanka today we have the need to give serious thought to this aspect of the phenomenon of life in society. We are much more than **on the brink of losing many favourable things**

in life which we have cherished over the centuries. Some in the leadership of this country have to think that these also matter, as much or **much more than rations of dhal and potatoes delivered through the state cooperative stores.** Our cultural heritage of Anuradhapura by way of art and architecture and religious institutions which date back to more than fifteen centuries, today mostly are preserved, buried under ten to fifteen feet of earth. Recent attempts at excavation by the Cultural Triangle reveals this. What stands visibly above the ground tells a lamentable tale of vandalism.

Take a look at the several more-than-life-size Samadhi Buddha statues of Anuradhapura, besides the better preserved one of Sri Javahar Lal Nehru association. While they have braved the inclement weather and climatic harshness over the centuries, a comparison of these with the equally gracious sculptures of a secular nature show that they have had to face greater hostilities in the hands of humans. Evidence of such rough handling is seen in Buddhist sculpture even in other countries like Afghanistan, South India and Indonesia. Our historical documents record that as far back as the time of Duṭṭhagāṃṇī, they suffered utter destruction like the Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan in the hands of Thalebans in more recent times.

Delightful pieces of secular sculpture like the Isurumuniya Lovers, and the Royal Family, now lying in the Isurumuniya Temple Museum, provide convincing stories about their chances of survival. Delicately carved flower and leaf designs in stone on balustrades and equally entertaining cute figures of dwarfs [*bahiravas* and *vāmanas*] are good examples of such secular art. They can claim as much attention as Venus du Milo in the Louvre in Paris or Michaelangelo's Pieta. Their imitations by our local artists, done today in masonry, are not a patch on the originals. The originals certainly need to be salvaged and saved for posterity, for the unborn generations of this country as well as for their admirers abroad. What would their future be when they come within independent states? Who would choose to be proud of them?

To liberate means 1. set at liberty, set free. 2. free [a country etc.] from an

oppressor or an enemy occupation. 3. free [a person] from rigid social conventions, esp. in sexual behaviour. No one would disagree that the independence which Sri Lanka gained in 1948, i.e. forty-nine years ago was a form of liberation, being set free from colonial rule. Even in this political sense, let us ask ourselves, what is the magnitude of liberation or freedom we now enjoy. In which direction can we speak of growth or development as a human community in the modern world? What has that freedom meant to us in our growth as a united political entity, i.e. a freed Sri Lanka? For a near half-century a disastrous process of splintering has gone on and it continues to do so today at a much more accelerated and alarming speed, clearly with a great deal of greedy foreign aid, political, religious and ethnic. This has to be viewed as a death-dealing process of fragmentation, like the increase of asteroids in outer space. Do we know that the world we live in is threatened with a meteorite assault of an asteroid in the very near future which might finish us up to nothing? If you wish to put the telescope to the blind eye, do so with a serious awareness as to what would follow.

From an age of peaceful co-existence within a real ethnic diversity [even in a limited way], we have now moved away into a new era of ethnic warfare. Like Aids, today it is a worldwide phenomenon. Unmindful of the tragedy which comes in the wake of both, people are more taken up with the excitement associated with each. It is glamorous and it precedes and shuts out of one's vision the painful consequences which follow. Hence as we speak of liberation today and pray for its achievement, let us have some clarity in our minds as to what we are looking out for.

Let us be freed from the abhorrence of this ethnic warfare and tribal violence. Let us respect one another and learn to live and let live. Let us not rob each other and dispossess ourselves of our legitimate possessions of persons and property and whatever else is our religious and cultural heritage. Let us also free ourselves of all contaminations of the twentieth century, no matter from where or whom we have had them, which corrode both the inside and outside of decent

human life. May all beings be well and happy. May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men. Let us correct our mistakes right now and guard ourselves against the possible inroads of the twenty-first century.